

---

# Responding to school disaffection: Insights from the Republic of Ireland

Dr Timothy Murphy  
Senior Lecturer  
Carnegie Faculty of Sport and Education  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
Headingley Campus  
Beckett Park  
Leeds LS6 3QS

## Introduction

In a recent publication, Fitzgerald (2003) inquired if the educational system in the Republic of Ireland was catering adequately for the less able learners and/or those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This paper responds to the question by providing an overview of educational inequality in the Irish context with a particular focus on what are referred to as critical transition points, at which particular cohorts of students are perceived to be in danger of dropping out of the system. It will also provide an examination of the explanations that are typically put forward to explain the persistence of educational inequality in the Republic of Ireland. Such persistence is all the more glaring when one considers the amount of investment that has been allocated to it, particularly since the middle of the 1960s. The concluding section will highlight specific strategies for tackling the vitally important question of educational disadvantage in the Irish context.

## Educational Disadvantage: An Overview:

The issue of inequality is never far from the headlines of the daily press. We are reminded that in certain 'dropout' schools 'half their pupils skip Leaving' (*Irish Times*, 2003). This refers to the Leaving Certificate taken at age 16, which signifies the end of compulsory schooling and is equivalent to the British GCSE exams. The Dublin 17 district is identified as having the poorest educational record in the country with only two out of five students taking the Leaving Certificate. A similar article in the *Irish Independent* (2005) presented findings from a Department of Education and Science report which contended that 24 schools in the Republic of Ireland have pre-Leaving Certificate dropout rates of sixty percent or more, 36 schools have

---

dropout rates of fifty to sixty percent and 37 schools suffer forty to fifty percent dropout rates.

Such inequalities have also been prioritised in a number of recent policy reports from the Department of Education and Science. The *White Paper on Education: Charting our Education Future* (1995), for example, suggested that:

*‘Where participation and achievement in the education system are impeded by physical, mental, economic or social factors, the State should seek to eliminate or compensate for the sources and consequences of educational disadvantage’* (p.6).

Lack of access to educational opportunities has a major impact on life-chances. As early as the 1970s, Dore (1976), for example, predicted the increasing importance that would be attached to educational credentials as a means of occupational selection. He also claimed that the more widely education certificates are used for occupational selection, the faster the rate that qualification inflation and the more examination-oriented schooling becomes.

Accepting then that educational credentials are a very significant determinant of life-chances, it might be helpful to consider briefly the critical transition points mentioned above which can restrict certain cohorts of students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from taking full advantage of what education has to offer.

### **Educational Disadvantage: Critical Transition Points**

In their analysis of the critical transition points in the Irish educational system, Tovey and Share (2000) make reference to a 1995 HEA *Interim Report of the Technical Working Group (TWG) of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education* that identifies three crucial schooling transition points at which the effects of socio-economic background are particularly significant.

The first transition point examines retention up to Leaving Certificate. The analysis at this phase indicates that there is social class variation, with only seven percent of professional groups failing to make this transition, whereas thirty-five percent of the unskilled manual group falter at this hurdle. The next transition point that is considered suggests that it is not enough to merely sit the Leaving Certificate but that it is also necessary to reach a satisfactory level of performance. Again, the HEA TWG report of 1995 found that of those who remain to take the Leaving Certificate only forty-three percent of the unskilled manual group achieve at least two honours, whereas eighty-seven percent of the higher professional group manage to achieve that level of performance.

The third transition point that is referred to in the report examines what is referred to as ‘Destinations’. In that connection, the report found that a young person whose father was a ‘higher professional’ was about six times more likely than the child of an unskilled or semi-skilled manual worker to enter a third-level institution.

### **Inequality in Education: Explanations**

The 1995 report then is testimony to the fact that socio-economic status is a powerful determinant of progress through the education system. As Tovey and Share acknowledge, given that: ‘such disparities have been long recognised in Ireland and that the State has made some attempts to increase equality of opportunity through its funding mechanisms and policy decisions, why is it that access to education remains so skewed by social class background? (2000, p180).

One typical explanation that is put forward to explain the persistence of educational inequalities is referred to as the cultural factors interpretation. McSorley’s (1997) study on school absenteeism in Clondalkin is a good example of such an explanation. Tovey and Share (2000) cite

---

this report when presenting the cultural implications of educational disadvantage. In particular, they make reference to McSorley's contention that parents in socially and economically deprived areas such as parts of Clondalkin: 'lack the economic, academic and emotional resources to ensure their children are up, fed, dressed, with homework properly done and uniforms, books and lunch all ready in time for the school day' (2000, p180).

Such culturalist interpretations for educational inequality, however, are susceptible to critique for the presumption of lack of cultural capital. Drudy and Lynch (1993), for example, are cognisant that researchers, being predominantly middle-class (and male), are predisposed to interpret the culture of others in the light of their own values and lifestyles. Therefore, those persons and communities who fail to meet the commonly accepted norms of cultural acceptability are perceived to be somewhat lacking.

Acknowledging the potential bias inherent in culturalist accounts for educational inequality, Clancy (1995) recommends that it would be helpful to move away from a reliance on such accounts. He suggests that instead of focusing on the class characteristics of those who succeed and those who fail, it is more appropriate to examine the class characteristics of the educational experience in which they succeed or fail. In that respect he invokes the late Basil Bernstein, who once wrote that if the culture of the school is to become part of the consciousness of the child, the culture of the child must first become part of the consciousness of the teacher. That change in perspective, Clancy contends, does not solve the problem but it might help.

This brings us to the second interpretation that is typically put forward to explain the persistence of inequalities in the Irish educational context, namely the content and nature of the

educational process itself. It invites us to consider if there are variations in the educational experiences that different schools offer. Emer Smyth (1999) addresses this question in a recent book *Do Schools Differ: Academic and Personal Development among Pupils in the Second Level Sector*. In it she claims that a number of reports indicate that gender, class and age remain key predictors of pupil performance in Irish schools. But significantly, she also contends that aspects of the organisation of the schools are also important: 'School matters', she argues.

Concerns about the impact that a school's organization can have on the educational experience that is provided is also discussed by McSorley (1997) in her recent study on the educational set-up in Clondalkin referred to above. In it, she acknowledges that in north and south-west Clondalkin over thirty-three percent of the school-going population is absent on any given day, with more than fifty percent of the population leaving school by the age of fifteen. This is partly because the academic content and organizational structures of school do not meet the needs of poor and disadvantaged pupils.

The evidence appears to suggest that the milieu of the working-class school itself is a cause of educational inequality. Research by Fagan (1995) also supports this view. In *Culture, Politics and Irish School Dropouts* (1995) she contends that for particular learners, the decision to opt out of school might confirm how they believe they are perceived. It is premised on the belief that the schooling system is set up so as to militate against certain cohorts of students, especially in terms of success at examinations. It stands to reason then that many of these learners who are convinced that they are destined not to succeed will decide to opt out of the system before it fails them. In Fagan's view, for these learners such a course of action might be the correct thing to do in terms of reaffirming who they are.

---

Economic factors constitute another reason for the persistence of educational inequalities in the Republic of Ireland. As Tovey and Share (2000) point out, poverty makes it more difficult for working-class students to maximise any advantages that the system can offer. Furthermore, they contend that parents experiencing poverty find it difficult to experience a positive relationship with the education system. This perception is supported by Lynch's (1999) claim that the persistence of poverty challenges the notion of choice in relation to access to education. She states that: 'those who have the resources can exercise choices and those without resources generally cannot, or have relatively restricted choices depending on the area they live in (1999, p 240).

### **Educational Disadvantage: Some Concluding Thoughts**

This paper opened with some reflections from Fitzgerald on the productivity of Irish education. There is no denying that in certain respects the Irish education system is the envy of the world. However, in other respects it is also in evidence that for certain groups of learners, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, a form of social pre-destination exists. As Thrupp points out: 'Schools which are able to shut out working class students in one way or another will indeed accrue advantages. Not only will teaching be easier, but the mean achievement level of students will probably rise, further boosting the position of such schools in the academic league table and their subsequent reputations ( 1999, p142).

Such developments are clearly evident in the schooling context of the Republic of Ireland today. In fact, the perception is growing that private fee-paying schools offer a better education than that which is provided for in public schools. As a consequence, the private sector is experiencing phenomenal growth at a time when support for public education is in

decline. In such a scenario, Thrupp contends that 'working class students are most likely to be left behind in 'sink' schools with increasingly poor intakes as higher SES families choose popular schools for positional advantage' (1999, p140).

Increasingly, then, there is evidence that those learners who have the resources, financial or otherwise, will be able to make the most out of the education system. Such sentiments would certainly appear to concur with Clancy's claim that 'the real beneficiaries of the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967 were the middle classes' (1995, p485). Ball and Vincent (2001) have also carried out some interesting research recently on the persistence of inequalities in education. Their research was conducted in England but their findings are equally applicable in the Irish context. They contend that with the introduction of free education there has been a noticeable widening of access to higher education. Such is also the case in Ireland, where a review of participation in higher education in 2003 for example found that participation rates had passed the fifty percent mark for the first time.

This means that the idea of education being the preserve of the middle classes is not necessarily the case anymore. As Ball and Vincent put it: 'A key aspect of the uncertainty among the middle classes is the idea that higher education, once their exclusive privilege, is now being assailed by 'intruders from below' (2001, p188). In their estimation, such developments have prompted the middle classes to seek out the best possible educational opportunities for their offspring. In this way, it is hoped that they will continue to enjoy the positional advantage that educational credentials afforded to them in previous times.

Clearly, the question of educational inequality is a very complex issue. Most recent research acknowledges this complexity. Accordingly, the findings often recommend a multi-stranded

approach for tackling this issue. This suggests that what is needed is an approach that does not rely entirely on cultural explanations nor on purely economic considerations. Furthermore, such an approach would hold that an explanation for educational inequality that looks exclusively at the organization and set up of the school would also be insufficient.

What is needed then is an explanation that will take account of each of these three individual explanations in an integrated way. Such a response was outlined at a recent conference on tackling educational disadvantage. At that conference, Hyland (2002) indicated that there is widespread recognition 'that successful initiatives to respond to the problem of educational disadvantage require integration and collaboration between statutory and voluntary agencies and between educators/trainers and parents and their communities' (p50). It is suggested that responses such as these offer the best opportunities for tackling the challenging and complex issue of educational disadvantage.

## References

- Ball, S. and Vincent, C. (2001) 'New Class Relations in Education: the Strategies of the 'Fearful' Middle Classes' J. Demaine (ed) *Sociology of Education Today*, PALGRAVE.
- Department of Education and Science (1995) *White Paper on Education: Charting our Education Future*, Dublin, The Stationary Office.
- Dore, R. (1976) *The Diploma Disease*, cited in Valarsan-Toomey, M. (1998) *The celtic tiger: from the outside looking in*, Dublin, Blackhall Publishing.
- Clancy, P. (1995) 'Education in the Republic of Ireland: the Project of Modernity?' in P. Clancy, S. Drudy, K. Lynch and L. O'Dowd (eds) *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives*, IPA in association with The Sociological Association of Ireland.
- Drudy, S. and Lynch, K. (1993) *Schools and Society in Ireland*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan.
- Fagan, G. H. (1995) *Culture, Politics, and Irish School Dropouts: Constructing Political Identities*, London, Bergin and Garvey).
- Fitzgerald, G. (2003) *Reflections on the Irish State*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press.
- HEA Technical Working Group (TWA) (1995) *Interim Report of the Technical Working Group of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education*, Dublin, Higher Education Authority).
- Hyland, Á. (2002), Looking to the Future – Ending Disadvantage, in: *Proceedings and Action Plan of National Forum*, Dublin, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra.
- Irish Independent* (2005) School Dropout Scandal, 19 October.
- Irish Times* (2003) The dropout schools: half their pupils skip leaving, 15 August.
- Lynch, K. (1999) *Equality in Education*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan.
- Smyth, E. (1999) *Do Schools Differ: Academic and Personal Development among Pupils in the Second Level Sector*, Dublin, Oak Tree Press in association with ESRI.
- Martin Thrupp (1999) *Schools Making A Difference: Let's Be Realistic! School mix, school effectiveness and the social limits of reform*, Open University Press.
- McSorley, C. (1997) *School Absenteeism in Clondalkin: Causes and Responses*, Dublin, The Clondalkin Partnership.
- Tovey, H. and Share, P. (2000) *A Sociology of Ireland*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan.